

A host of ideas

Tips for cutting holiday stress from two experts (and sisters)

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Your front yard shines with tons of lights. Inside, the tree is up and the scent of cinnamon fills every corner of your home.

But how much thought have you given to decorating your dining and buffet tables?

Lenore Nolan-Ryan, the Lauderdale-By-The-Sea cooking school teacher, and her interior designer sister, April Nolan, offer last-minute ideas for quick entertaining menus, plus tips on sprucing up your home without breaking the bank.



The golden rule: Think of a simple menu. "From the moment you greet your guests at the door you need to be relaxed," says Nolan-Ryan. She suggests buying cheese, veggie platters and even dessert at your favorite specialty store or supermarket. "It's like if you had prepared them but effortless."

Prepare in advance: Do as much of the prep work in advance of cooking. Two days before, prepare the sauces, cut the veggies and season the meat. "But if your plan is to

have an informal gathering, set up a self-service buffet with bite-size food,"Nolan-Ryan recommends.

Sitting-down dinner: Use disposable plates and place settings. You don't need your finest china or place settings. But if you still want to showcase your flatware, you don't need all of them to match.

For the kids: Make kid-friendly food. On Christmas or New Year's Day, the children will be busy playing with their new toys. So, take it easy and have the food they like ready for them: chicken fingers, corn dogs, mini-hot dogs and little sandwiches shaped in the form of stars, Christmas trees, Santa and the angels. You can use cookie cutters to make these.

Holiday tokens: Don't break the bank, but it's nice to have small gifts for family and friends. A brownie wrapped in plastic paper, a holiday mug filled with candies or a 2012 calendar will do the trick. Check out your dollar store for ideas. "What really counts is to enjoy planning the party," Nolan-Ryan says. "If you have joy in your heart, your guests will feel it."

A toast to remember: Have lots of choices on hand. The traditional New Year's toast demands champagne for the adults and cider for the kids. But it is always good to have wine (white, red and rose), sodas and sparkling water. If you want to treat your guests, have a drink dispenser filled with sangria or punch.

Decking the tables: Open your closets, cabinets and trunks before buying anything new. Hidden treasures you may have forgotten all these years will look great on your dining or buffet table. Old silver trays, crystal bases, sea shells, ceramic or clay pots all lend character to a table. "People don't notice the items they have at home," says Nolan-Ryan. "They don't need to buy lots of things to dress up their tables. It doesn't have to be perfect; they just need to be fearless, creative and festive."

Checking it twice: Look again at your pantry and fridge. They hold food and products that can be used as decorations — fruits, cinnamon sticks, candies.

Match colors: Set your table in the same color scheme of your home. "If your walls have warm colors like gold and brown, do the same on your dining table, and mix in some green and red tones," says Nolan. For a formal sit-down dinner, dress up your table in black, white, gold and silver. "Those colors speak of tuxedos and elegance. Use Christmas balls, plates, napkins and table cloths," she adds.

Work in advance: Remember to make things easy for yourself. Set the table a day ahead. And if you are preparing a buffet, use Post-it notes to mark what items go where.

Count down: Steal this great New Year's table decorating idea from Nolan. "It would be so unusual to have different kinds of clocks on the center of the table. Wind ivy or

another type of greenery through the clocks, add grapes and finish with some beautiful candlelight. The clocks could even be set to ring at midnight!"

Now relax and enjoy your party.

Happy Holidays!